

29 October 1963

MEMORANDUM FOR: The Special Assistant for National Security Affairs

SUBJECT : Khrushchev and the Soviet Lunar Program

The Khrushchev Statement on 25 October

1. The reports published in the US press on 27 October stating that Khrushchev has "withdrawn" from the "moon race" not only distorted the import of his actual remarks but conveyed a misleading impression that a major change in Soviet lunar plans had recently taken place.
2. In reply to a question that had been submitted in advance as to whether a Soviet flight to the moon "is planned for the not too distant future," Khrushchev said, "I cannot at present say when this will be done." He added that the USSR is not "at present planning" such an operation, but indicated that Soviet scientists are working on the problem and that the "necessary research is being done." Khrushchev noted that the Americans "want to land a man on the moon by 1970" and wished them success. After saying the Soviets would observe US experience, particularly how the Americans contrive to "return home," Khrushchev indicated that the USSR did not want to compete in "sending people to the moon without careful preparation." He contended that no benefits would be derived from competition which might result in the "destruction of people." He concluded with a statement that "much work will have to be done and good preparations made for a successful flight to the moon by man."
3. This is not the first time that Khrushchev has voiced skepticism regarding the feasibility of a manned lunar landing. Khrushchev's remarks on 25 October bear a close resemblance to views he has expressed over the past two years. In an interview with Cyrus Sulzberger in September 1961, he said the USSR had no fixed schedule and that the problem was not landing a man on the moon but "getting him off again." Khrushchev told Gardner Cowles in April 1962 that he could "not give any date" for a manned lunar flight and spoke of the "many different problems" and great cost involved in this mission. Khrushchev's remarks last Friday also parallel views deliberately given to Western scientists by Soviet scientific officials earlier this year. These views alleged that Soviet scientists, at least for the time being, regard manned lunar missions as unfeasible.

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4. The similarity between Khrushchev's remarks to Sulzberger and Cowles and his statements last Friday casts doubt on the assumption that the Soviet leaders have taken some major decisions in recent weeks affecting the scope or pace of their lunar program. In these interviews, Khrushchev indicated that Soviet scientists were working in this field and that they were encountering many problems. In effect, he attempted to create the impression that the Soviets were not engaged in an extensive high-priority program along the lines, for example, of Project Apollo.

Political Aims

5. Since all the questions answered by Khrushchev in his press conference were submitted in advance, it must be assumed that he had some specific purpose in mind in commenting on the Soviet lunar program at this time. Internally, the Soviet consumer's current situation and prospects are poor, and Khrushchev may have wished to reassure the population that large sums were not being spent on non-productive projects. Externally, one of Khrushchev's main objectives in agreeing to the test ban treaty and encouraging a detente atmosphere in East-West relations is to retard the pace of the arms and technological race, thereby relieving some of the pressures on Soviet resources. Against this background of general Soviet policy, we would interpret Khrushchev's deliberate effort to downgrade the urgency of a manned lunar landing as being aimed at influencing US Congressional and public opinion on the question of the expenditures and pace of the US lunar program. Khrushchev also is making it clear that the Soviet Union is unwilling to allow the United States to set the terms for competition in space.

Scientific and Technical Factors

6. The USSR has been energetically pursuing a space program which includes lunar exploration. However, launch capabilities still depend on the only large boost vehicle so far developed in the USSR. This booster is not powerful enough for manned lunar landing missions, nor can it serve as a building block for such missions.

7. [REDACTED]
We believe that a larger engine is under development but we do not know whether it will be suitable for a manned lunar landing. [REDACTED]

8. At the same time, Soviet efforts to carry out the unmanned space reconnaissance which could relate to a manned lunar landing continue, despite repeated failures.

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Economic Factors

9. Khrushchev and other Soviet officials have often expressed concern in the past over the high cost of a manned lunar landing program. In recent years Soviet military and space expenditures have placed a heavy burden on the economy. Moreover, these expenditures have grown at a considerably faster pace than the economy as a whole. The impact has also been severe in terms of competition for high quality manpower and materials. Even though some costly military programs are approaching completion, pursuit of a high-priority manned lunar landing program would aggravate and prolong the present period of serious economic strain in the USSR. Unless the Soviets have made greater technical progress toward a manned lunar landing than we now perceive, we believe that present economic stringencies are a considerable argument against attempting to compete with the US Apollo program.

Conclusion

10. We think that the primary intent of Khrushchev's statement was to change the focus of the space race. Present evidence, while far from conclusive, suggests that the USSR is not now trying to land a man on the moon in advance of the Apollo program. If this is so, then Khrushchev is trying to discount this American achievement in advance, and perhaps delay it as well, while intending to sustain Soviet prestige with a series of earlier, less expensive but still spectacular projects, such as the orbiting of a manned space station and a manned circumlunar flight.

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